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ABSTRACT

Community college students who experience academic difficulty as measured by grade point average were compared to students not in academic difficulty on five constructs: reading ability, career decisiveness, learning styles, study habits and attitudes, and motivational factors. The 19 students in academic difficulty and 31 students not in academic difficulty completed the following instruments: the Diagnostic Test for Language Skills, the Career Decision Scale, the Learning Styles Inventory, the Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes, and the Personality Research Form. A locally-developed interview consisting of 28 forced-choice and open-ended questions was also used to gain anecdotal data of the same measures included in the five standardized instruments. The interview also addressed other variables that related to Rockland Community College, including enrollment influences, academic aspirations, use of student services, method of academic advisement, satisfaction with the chosen curriculum, and overall satisfaction with the college. It was found that academic difficulty was most closely associated with reading comprehension skills, expectations for academic success, and study habits and attitudes. In addition to four recommendations for colleges, implementation plans in progress at Rockland Community College are identified. (SW)

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A RESEARCH BASED APPROACH TO STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC DIFFICULTY: CHARACTERISTICS AND INTERVENTION

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This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, March 15-17, 1985. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

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Abstract: Students who experience academic difficulty as measured by GPA were compared to students not in academic difficulty at a community college on five constructs: reading ability, career decisiveness, learning styles, study habits and attitudes, and motivational factors. The results showed that academic difficulty was most closely associated with reading comprehension skills, expectations for academic success and study habits and attitudes. These results are being used as a basis for planning an intervention strategy for students in academic difficulty and for further research into the predictive value of the measures used.

Introduction and Perspectives: The academic success and retention of students are primary concerns of many colleges. Although the community colleges have been less affected by decreasing enrollments,these concerns are now particularly relevant. The attempt to provide an education to all who desire one has led to a proliferation of open admissions policies. As a result, students enter higher education with a wide variety of abilities and levels of preparation for college work. In response to this variety, programs have been developed to meet the needs of academically superior students as well as students with limited English proficiency or limited academic skills. There has been particular stress on the development of programs to raise the academic proficiency of students to the level necessary for college success. In spite of these efforts, there is a substantial number of students who have difficulty in meeting institutional academic standards. This group of students not only may be in need of a comprehensive intervention strategy, but also has a significantly higher attrition rate than academically successful students (Nisbet, Ruble & Schurr, 1982). An appropriate intervention strategy may require an analysis of the characteristics which distinguish students in academic difficulty from students who experience academic success.

In Tinto's (1975) proposed model of the process of college attrition, the student's academic and social integration in the institution play a significant role. More recently,

Pascarella and Chapman (1983) have shown that academic integration has a stronger effect on persistence than did social integration at both 2-and 4-year commuter institutions. Academic integration has been operationalized along several dimensions (e.g. Pascarella & Chapman, 1983) which have also been implicated in academic success (e.g. Carney & Geis, 1981; Nisbet, Ruble & Schurr, 1982). On the basis of their findings, it seems that the factors which may be associated with academic success or failure would include cognitive ability factors and several attitudinal factors. Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico and Koschier (1980) presented evidence implicating career decisiveness as an influence on academic performance. It is also probable that the additional factors of motivation, study habits and attitudes, and learning style (Kolb, 1981) may have significant influences on academic performance. This study investigated the relationship between some of these factors and academic success or failure.

Purpose: The twofold purpose of this study was to assess several relevant cognitive and affective characteristics of the students who experience academic difficulty in order to design a system for delivering appropriate interventions.

Subjects: The subjects were drawn from a randomly selected pool of 125 community college students, contacted by letter and phone for participation in the study. There were 19 students in academic difficulty and 31 students not in academic difficulty who agreed to participate in the study. Academic difficulty was defined by the college policy on academic probation and review, and was based on grade point average.

There are factors which may contribute to students experiencing difficulty with academics that are peripheral to the actual academic activities. For example, students who experienced serious problems with a specific degree program and subsequently changed to a program more suited to their abilities may still appear on a list of students who are experiencing academic difficulty. These students may be performing satisfactorily in the second program, but the educational history of the first program is sufficient to bring their GPA below the acceptable threshold for satisfactory performance. Similarly, students may have academic difficulties related to factors outside of school, such as job commitments, family pressures, or other temporary problems. We felt that inclusion of these students might mask the characteristics of the students we wanted to observe. Consequently, we conducted a content analysis of 100 randomly selected transcripts from a pool of students who were on academic probation or academic review. We intentionally excluded from the study students who had changed degree programs and had achieved satisfactory progress in their current degree program. In addition, we

assessed only the most recent 24 credits. Subjects for the study consisted of volunteers from a randomly selected group who were contacted by a series of letters and phone calls.

Procedure: Students who agreed to participate in the study were assigned to a testing session. The five instruments used were administered to the students in small groups. At the conclusion of the testing sessions, the students arranged a time for an interview with one of the experimentors. The five instruments used during the testing session were:

1. Diagnostic Test for Language Skills (DTLS) (College Board, 1978) to assess reading comprehension.

2. The Career Decision Scale (CDS) (Osipow et al., 1980) to measure career indecisiveness.

3. The Learning Styles Inventory (Canfield, 1977) was used to assess preferred learning styles. This instrument provides measures on conditions for learning, content areas, mode of learning and expectations of academic performance, as follows:

    a. Conditions for learning. The instructional climate and interpersonal relationships which may affect a student's motivation to learn. Scores are organized into four categories: affiliation (with peers or instructor); structure of environment (organization, detail); eminence (competition, authority); and achievement (goal-setting, independence).

    b. Content. The student's comparative level of interest in four major fields: Numeric (working with numbers and logic); Qualitative (working with words or language); Inanimate (working with things; and People (working with people).

    c. Mode. Preference for one of four learning modes: Listening (hearing information); reading (examining the written word); iconic (viewing illustrations); and direct experience (handling or performing).

    d. Expectancy Score. The student's predicted level of performance: outstanding or superior; average or good;average or

satisfactory; or below average or unsatisfactory.

4. Brown and Holtzman's Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes (1967) was used to examine the student's use of studying techniques and attitudes.

5. Seven factors from Jackson's (1974) Personality Research Form were used to assess motivational factors including the endurance, cognitive structure, order, achievement, play, change, and impulsivity scales.

During the interview session a locally developed interview consisting of 28 forced choice and open-ended questions was also used to gain anecdotal data on some of the same measures included in the five standardized instruments, including career decisiveness, study practices and attitudes toward school. The interview also attended to variables not explicitly included in the instruments, particularly as they related to Rockland Community College. These included the students' reasons for attending (cost, convenience, program availability), expectations concerning the level of work, knowledge and use of student services, method of academic advisement, satisfaction with their particular curriculum and degree of overall satisfaction. The interviews were conducted by 3 members of the research team.

Results and Conclusions: This was primarily a study for the college in the general area of retention. Therefore, our ability to respond as an institution to addressable issues for needs of our students was paramount . In the interpretation of the data, two cautions are noted:

1. There were statistical limitations due to the sample size, and our intent to do multiple regression analysis, and
2. The analysis of attitudes & expectations was conducted post hoc and could also be accounted for by group membership. That is, attitudes expressed could also result from the student's history of academic success or difficulty.

It could be argued that these caveats may restrict the utility of the results, but there interview data tended to support our conclusions and recommendations.

A multiple regression analysis and examination of the correlation coefficient matrix (table 1) revealed that academic difficulty seemed to be most associated with the cognitive dimension of reading comprehension skills and the attitudinal factors of expectations for academic success and

study habits and attitudes. These factors accounted for approximately 65% of the differences between students in academic difficulty and students who are not in academic difficulty.

Recommendations: In spite of the methodological problems, there were three conclusions drawn from this study on which to base recommendations. First, students who were in academic difficulty had reading difficulties. Secondly, students in academic difficulty had lower expectations for academic success. Thirdly, students in academic difficulty seemed to have poor study habits and attitudes.

The first recommendation was to develop a required course for students in academic difficulty, that would attend to reading ability, study habits, and attitudes about school. The second recommendation was based on the initial examination of the transcripts of the subject pool. It was suggested that a review of the academic evaluation process should be conducted to incorporate such circumstances as change of degree programs; this criterion alone had a significant impact on the definition of academic success. The third recommendation, also based in part on the review of the transcripts, was that the issue of whether to suspend or dismiss students who remain in academic difficulty for several semesters be discussed. The fourth recommendation was to continue the research to determine if these factors have predictive value.

Implementation: The most current response to the first recommendation involves utilizing a group of selected and trained faculty on release time or overload to meet individually with students who have been newly placed on academic probation. They will negotiate with the student an individual learning contract to address the student's academic problems. The student's response may be minimal for students who have transferred or changed programs, or students who had transient personal problems or pressures not likely to continue as influencing factors. The options available for students who do require intervention will include:

1. Comprehensive assessment of abilities and educational planning.

2. A Life Skills course designed to provide the student with an extensive examination of developmental theory and personal goals and expectations.

3. A course on study skills and time management.

4. A computer-assisted course in reading skills.

5. Other unique options or combinations of options.

This intervention strategy will be tested and evaluated in the Fall of 1985, with full scale implementation scheduled for Spring 1986.
This intervention strategy has several advantages. It attempts to offer a variety of individually tailored solutions to match a variety of students' problems. It encourages contact with faculty and in fact may affect retention positively. It also addresses the needs of those students who were purposly excluded from the original subject pool: the students with non-academic problems.

In response to the second recommendation, the process for evaluating academic standing was reviewed and adjusted to read as follows:

> Students who have attempted 1-9 points and have a GPA of below 1.10 are placed on Academic Warning. This results in a letter. Students who have accumulated more points and do not meet a minimum GPA level are placed on Academic Probation.
>
> This is a process that is more sensitive to the student's changing conditions than the previous method of determining academic difficulty.

In response to the third recommendation, the new policy on Academic Probation now reads:

> Students who are placed on Academic Probation the first time will be assessed and will be required to enroll in a designated learning activity designed to assist students experiencing academic difficulty.
>
> Students who are placed on Academic Probation a second time will be required to meet with a Counselor/Educational Planner to develop an educational contract prior to enrollment in the next semester.
>
> Students who are placed on Academic Probation a third time will be dismissed from the College. Alternative options will be suggested for these students. Dismissed students will not be eligible to re-enroll until after two semesters have elapsed. Re-enrollment will be dependent on an interview and a suggested academic program.

In response to the fourth recommendation, research will begin in Fall 1985 with the implementation of the new policy on

academic standing and a new system of data collection on students. The Data Inventory of Student Change is a series of instruments designed to collect longitudinal data on students as they progress through their educational career at the college. It includes items on study attitudes and habits, expectations, academic self concept, and other affective measures. There are also exams in language skills on all entering students. These two sources of data will serve to complete a much larger scale study of students and as an aid in developing the individual learning activities for students in academic difficulty.

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TABLE 1

CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS OF SELECTED VARIABLES

	GROUP	GPA	DTLS	CDS	GOAL SET	INDEP.	EXPECT.	STD. HAB.	STD. ATT.	STD. ORIEN.	ORDER
GROUP											
GPA	-0.86										
DTLS	-0.38	0.49									
CDS	0.21	-0.16	-0.15								
GOAL SET	-0.48	0.27	0.19	0.14							
INDEP.	-0.34	0.43	0.29	0.03	0.41						
EXPECT.	0.52	-0.62	-0.10	0.08	0.03	-0.31					
STUDY HAB	-0.38	0.48	0.11	-0.08	0.17	0.34	-0.72				
STUDY ATT	-0.23	0.44	0.09	-0.32	0.16	0.45	-0.64	0.72			
STUDY ORIEN	-0.33	0.50	0.11	-0.21	0.18	0.42	-0.74	0.93	0.92		
ORDER	0.19	-0.29	0.12	-0.05	-0.12	-0.30	0.45	-0.57	-0.46	-0.56	
COGN STRUCT	0.24	0.24	-0.14	-0.02	-0.22	-0.27	0.16	-0.40	-0.18	-0.31	0.58

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